

THE IMMINENT APPEARING OF CHRIST

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The doctrine of the Lord's second advent has experienced a remarkable revival of interest in contemporary neo-orthodox theology.¹ But its further discussion among Bible believers, particularly as this is related to the translation of the church, might appear to be both undesirable and unnecessary: undesirable, as reopening the emotionally charged "rapture rapture"; and unnecessary, as repeating arguments that for years have unduly monopolized the thinking of many evangelicals. There exists, however, a correlation between the advent and the rapture which, though dominant in the past, has been widely overlooked in recent literature. This classic view, moreover, combines many of the positive features both of the pre-tribulationism that has arisen in the last century and of the post-tribulationism that has, increasingly, reacted against it. The following paper seeks therefore, to sketch the leading historical interpretations that the church has held toward its own place in the events that surround her Lord's second coming and to suggest a Biblical reconstruction that reflects the classical viewpoint.²

I. HISTORICAL POSITIONS

THE EARLY CHURCH. Prior to the Council of Nicaea in 325 the church in general held two convictions respecting the sequence of events in Christ's second coming.³ (1) It expected His appearing any day. I Clement 23 (A.D. 96) states, "Soon and suddenly shall He come"; and Ignatius to the Ephesians I (c. A.D. 105), "The last times are come upon us." Now was it simply a complex of events that was imminent or was it Christ's own appearing? "Look for *Him*."⁵ (2) The early church anticipated His coming as post-tribulation, that is, as subsequent to the persecutions they would suffer at the hands of the antichrist and to the heavenly phenomena that would inaugurate the wrath of God against this evil one. Barnabas 4 (before 100) warns, "Withstand coming sources of danger . . . the Black One." Nor was it simply tribulation in general;⁶ it was *the great tribulation*: "Christ shall come from heaven with glory, when the man of apostasy . . . shall venture to do unlawful deeds on earth against us Christians."⁷ That both of these convictions were held at the same time arises from the early church's contemporaneous, or as we would call it, historical, method of prophetic interpretation. Barnabas 4 states, "Now in this wicked time withstand coming sources of danger," and then quotes Daniel 7 on the antichrist as potentially present. Cyprian (about 250) writes in Epistle 55:1, "The day of affliction has begun to hang over our heads, and the end of the world and the time of Antichrist to draw near."⁸ That is, they felt that the persecutions they were then enduring at the hands of imperial Rome could be those of the final tribulation and that therefore the Lord's appearing could be imminent.

The only exception to this view came with the close of the second century in the writings of certain of the apologists, who succeeded the apostolic fathers. Irenaeus (about 185) first concluded, from Daniel 7 and Revelation 17, that the Roman Empire would have to fall and be partitioned among ten kings before there could take place the persecution of the church by the antichrist and the latter's overthrow at the second advent.⁹ In this view Irenaeus was not widely followed;¹⁰ but history has vindicated his futuristic exegesis to this extent: Christ did not indeed return before the fall of Rome.

Post-Nicene Christianity, however, deviated from the classical anticipation of Christ's advent. With the official recognition of Christianity by the emperor Constantine, the Roman government could no longer be identified as the antichrist; and Augustine's identification of the church with the millennium¹¹ meant that only in the still distant future, after the rise of Gog and Magog, could Christ appear. True, there came to be no lack of candidates for Gog and Magog, whether barbarian, Mohammedan, or Turk; but even the approach of the year 1,000 created no real eschatological anticipation:¹² the church was the kingdom, and little thought was given to any other glorious appearing. This attitude characterizes Romanism up to the present day.

THE REFORMATION CHURCH. The Reformation of the sixteenth century recaptured the classical hope of the imminent appearing of Christ. The reformers adopted the Waldensian identification of the papacy with the antichrist¹³ and prayed that the Lord would shortly appear to destroy this Roman Magog. Luther called the Pope, "A greater pest than the Turks," and insisted, "I will not permit anyone to rob me of my opinion that the day of the Lord is not far hence."¹⁴ Calvin, in turn, concluded: "Today we must be alert to grasp the imminent return of Christ"; and again, "Be prepared to expect Him every day, or rather every moment."¹⁵ This hope of the reformers also continued to be post-tribulation, their amillennialism thus making the final judgement itself imminent; compare Melancthon: "The day of judgement is already upon [us] and is at the doors."¹⁶ But it *was* imminent; and the reason lay in their interpretation of prophecy historically, that is, as capable of contemporary fulfillment. Latimer, for example, explained:

St. Paul says, "The Lord will not come till the swerving from the faith cometh" (II Thess. 2:3), which thing is already done and past. Antichrist is already known throughout all the world: wherefore the day is not far off.¹⁷

History has, of course, proved that the reformers were mistaken. Theirs were not the days of the great tribulation, and Christ's coming was not in fact imminent. But to Calvin of Geneva, as to Clement of Rome, they *could* have been. As Calvin commented on Paul's words in I Thess. 4:15,

He means by this to arouse the Thessalonians to wait for it, nay more, to hold all believers in suspense, that they may not promise themselves some particular time: for, granting that it was by a special revelation that he knew that Christ would come at a somewhat later time [II Thess. 2:3-5], it was nevertheless necessary . . . that believers might be prepared at all times.

Post-reformation Christianity, however, again proceeded to deviate from the classical anticipation of the imminent appearing, and in four ways. (1) The post-millennialism of Daniel Whitby, 1706, reacted against certain Anabaptist extremes of adventist date-setting by teaching that the overthrow of the pope and the Turk would serve to introduce, not the visible reign of Christ, but the spiritual conversion of the world and its submission to the church. Whitby's views were widely accepted, as represented by American orthodoxy from Jonathan Edwards to Hodge and Warfield, though the bubble of a millennium without the King has been generally punctured by the impact of World Wars I and II.¹⁸

(2) But if postmillennialism postponed Christ's advent by 1,000 years, the inroads of rationalistic liberalism and neo-orthodoxy have well nigh eliminated the "blessed hope" from the major Protestant denominations. Such exegesis cannot tolerate objective, supernaturalistic predictions of still future events, but is shut up to preterist interpretations, that apply only to ancient history. This approach did serve to restore the Bible's predictive time notices, such as the 2,300 days and the 1,290 days of Daniel 8:14 and 12:11, to the literal Maccabean events that they were intended to describe. But without a valid, Biblical basis for knowledge of the future, the mem-

ber churches of the World Council have groped in vain to formulate an even rudimentary eschatology.¹⁹

(3) The dispensationalism that now dominates much of evangelical thought incorporated the futuristic exegesis of post-reformation Romanism. Conceived by the Jesuit Francisco Ribera (1590) so as to relieve Rome of its Protestant identification as antichrist, this futurism assigned most of the Book of Revelation, including the antichrist, to an as yet unrealized future; it was first popularized in non-Romanist circles by S. R. Maitland in 1826 and was assimilated into Plymouth Brethren dispensationalism. By the innovation in the 1830's of pretribulationism, the Brethren were able to preserve their hope in the imminent rapture of the church, though the dispensational interpretation of the events of Revelation 4-18 as unfulfilled prohibited the retention of the rest of the classical hope, namely of Christ's imminent appearing to set up His kingdom.²⁰ Yet (4) the counter-movement in modern evangelicalism of the reacting post-tribulationism of Alexander Reese, George Ladd, and others, while returning to an appreciation of the rapture as occurring at Christ's appearing in glory, has continued to accept the futurism of Ribera and Maitland and thus to deny its imminency. Norman Douty, for example, concludes, "The rapture is not capable of occurring at any moment. There are intervening events."²¹ There remains, however, a third Biblical alternative; and a growing number of modern evangelicals, such as Harold Ockenga, are coming to favor a full return to that imminent post-tribulationism which constitutes the classical view of the early church and of the reformers. Little has been written in its behalf since A. J. Gordon's *Ecce Venit* in 1889, but the time seems ripe that all *three* views be weighed in the light of Scripture.

II. EXEGETICAL DATA

Without attempting to retrace the shifting arguments of dispensationalism and of its opponents, one cannot but conclude that Scripture opposes the concept of two returns of Christ, one before a future tribulation, and another after it. For example,²² Isa. 25:6-11 speaks of God's swallowing up death at the Messiah's appearing, but I Cor. 15:55 quotes this post-tribulation event as occurring at the resurrection and rapture of Christian believers;²³ Mt. 24:23-31 speaks of the great tribulation, then of the sun being darkened in God's wrath, then of Christ's appearing, and then of the gathering together of God's elect, the church, not the presently unconverted Israel who in 22:14 are specifically contrasted with the *eklektoi*, the chosen; II Thess. 1:6-8 speaks of "rest" for the saints only at the revelation of Christ and as simultaneous with His afflicting of the unbelievers; and Rev. 19:20 speaks of the marriage supper of the Lamb and of the first resurrection only at the time of His appearing to rule. To postulate with pre-tribulationism that "the main aspect" of the resurrection must have taken place seven years before this "first" resurrection is hardly normal exegesis. But if the natural reading of Scripture produces the classical doctrine of post-tribulationism, it also produces the classical doctrine of imminence. For example,²⁴ Mk. 13:33-37 speaks of "watching," not simply of watching out over ones conduct,²⁵ but specifically of watching *for the Lord*, who might come at any time; and Lk. 12:36-40 speaks of "looking for the Lord," who comes suddenly and unannounced. Such potential immediacy is the heart of imminence. Modern post-tribulationism that has reacted against pre-tribulationism, but that still believes in certain prolonged, and yet future, antecedents to the Lord's return, exposes its own inadequacy when it is forced to insist, as does Ladd, "Whatever this means, it cannot involve a secret, any-moment, unexpected return of Christ."²⁶ The question should rather be raised about the legitimacy of those antecedents to the Lord's post-tribulation coming that seem to force a man to deny the Biblical teaching of His imminence.

ALLEGED (ACTUALLY PAST) ANTECEDENTS. The Scriptural passages that have been improperly applied to the future are legion. The following, however, illustrate certain major areas of unnecessary futurism. Ezekiel 40-46 speaks of a temple to be built in Jerusalem; but the instructions seem intended for those of Ezekiel's contemporaries who returned from exile in 538 B.C., not for the days prior to Christ's return. Daniel 9:24-27 speaks of 70 weeks of years, or 490 years, from the rebuilding of Jerusalem to the Messiah; but up to the rise of the Plymouth Brethren movement almost no one except the patristic exceptions of Irenaeus and Hippolytus thought of the 70th week as applying to anything except Christ's first century ministry.²⁷ The tribulation and abomination of desolation of Mt. 24:4-22 and the Roman Empire of Rev. 13, 14:8-13, and 17:19:5 seem likewise to have an edequate, preterist fulfillment in ancient history and need no longer be considered antecedents to Christ's imminent appearing.

POTENTIAL PRESENT ANTECEDENTS. Scripture contains certain long-range conditions preparatory to the second advent, such as Mt. 24:14, the preaching of the gospel of the kingdom unto all nations; Mt. 24:38-29, false security; II Thess. 2:2-3, apostasy; II Thess. 2:6-8, lawlessness; and Zech. 12:10, the presence of some Jews as inhabitants of Jerusalem. But all of these are being fulfilled today as never before.

More significant, as of potentially present fulfillment, are the prophecies of "the great tribulation." This phrase occurs only in Rev. 7:14; and it elaborates on the conditions that set the stage for the manifestation of the face of Him that sitteth on the throne (6:16), the prediction with which the preceding chapter of Revelation had closed. Rev. 7:1-8 then goes back to depict how God's saints are "sealed" to protect them from catastrophies of nature that chapter 6 had first revealed as heralding His coming (6:12-14). The multitude, then, of 7:9-17 who are martyred in "the great tribulation" (7:14) would seem, correspondingly, to be a part of those that chapter 6 had introduced as "slain for the word of God" (6:9), and particularly that last portion of the martyrs, "Their brethren, who should be killed even as they were" (6:11). Similarly Mt. 24:29 speaks of natural catastrophes and of the coming of the Son of man as "immediately after the tribulation" of vv. 23-28. The great tribulation, with its multitude of faithful saints promoted to heaven, must indeed come before the natural phenomena and the Lord's visible advent: for the saints of Revelation are never mentioned as killed by the phenomena of nature (cf. 9:4, 16:2) but only the persecutions and martyrdoms of men (11:7, 16:6, 20:4); and it is the Lord's coming that permanently terminates such persecution (Lk. 21:28).

Upon the potential contemporaneity of the tribulation period depends the possibility of the imminent appearing of Christ. Pre-tribulationists have been quick to assert that "only flagrant spiritualization of the tribulation passages . . . can possibly save the doctrine of imminency for the post-tribulationist."²⁸ But to deny the rigorous futurism of both dispensationalists and those who have reacted against them need by no means entail a spiritualization of prophecy. Historical fulfillment is characteristically real and literal, as the churches living at this moment behind the iron curtain of communism can testify, to their sorrow. Classical post-tribulationists would, however, question the liberality with which futurist interpreters have assigned Biblical data to this tribulation period. The only relevant verses concerning its duration are Daniel 7:25, the "time, times, and half a time," which could be anything from 3½ day to 7½ decades. Even strict pre-tribulationists admit that the beginning of the tribulation is hard to fix exactly,²⁹ and it seems best to say simply that we shall know the tribulation is over when we see the Lord coming in glory. Similarly, the antichrist, the eschatological leader of sin, is identified only as the ruler of some state north of Palestine (Dan. 11:40), who overflows and deceives much of the world (II Thess. 2:9) by Satanic propaganda, speaking great things"

(Dan. 7:8), while having power particularly over Egypt (11:42-43). Thus in the early 1800's the antichrist was equated with Napoleon; today he could be Abdul Gamal Nasser's evil genius, namely Nikita Khrushchev; but should our Lord tarry he would have to be someone else. For though the antichrist will have been manifested in the world prior to the day of the Lord (II Thess. 2:2-3) his final identification will be determined only by his resistance to Christ, come in His Glory. As long as historical interpretation admits the *potentially* present fulfillment of the tribulation prophecies, as least as far as men can tell, then the Lord's return at any time remains a valid anticipation.

FUTURE ANTECEDENTS. There remain a limited number of prophecies that have not yet been fulfilled and that must be interpreted both futuristically and as antecedents to the appearing of Christ and the rapture of the church. These make up the first stage of "the wrath of God"; they seem to include the 6th seal and the first four trumpets and bowls of Revelation; and they are summarized in the Lord's words,

Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun shall be darkened, the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of heaven shall be shaken: and then . . . all the tribes of the earth shall see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory (Mt. 24:29-31).

Two particular qualifications remain to be noted about this first stage of the wrath of God. (1) It is discriminatory. For the church, though present on earth, will "prevail to escape all these things and to stand before the Son of man" (Lk. 21:36; cf. I Thess. 5:4,9) while God's wrath is poured out "upon the men that had the mark of the beast." (Rev. 16:2, cf. v. 6). (2) It is brief, a matter of mere minutes. The day of the Lord comes suddenly; and thus, despite its preceding signs, which are as bright as lightning, the Lord's advent is truly unexpected, or imminent (Lk. 17:24, 12:38). The second stage of God's wrath, in contrast, which includes the 7th seal of Revelation (that follows Christ's advent, 6:16) and the last three trumpets and bowls (among the survivors of which are found no Godly men, 9:20), contains events of considerable duration: "half an hour" (8:1), or five months" (9:5,10), and embraces the gathering of the kings of the whole world to their defeat at Armageddon (16:14, 16). But these events occur as subsequent to the Lord's appearing and are, as a result, irrelevant to the church's hope of imminent translation.

The alternatives facing modern evangelicalism may thus be charted as follows:

